

Does Reflective Equilibrium Solve the Problem?

I. Reflective Equilibrium and Intuitions

Where do intuitions fit into the method of reflective equilibrium?

It is commonly assumed that one's initial *considered moral judgments* must all be *intuitive judgments*.

in favor of this interpretation: Rawls' linguistic analogy.

against this interpretation: None of the filters rule out judgments based on their source.

[In "Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics" (1951), Rawls requires that a considered judgment "not be determined by a conscious application of principles so far as this may be evidenced by introspection" (p. 183), but in latter versions this requirement is dropped.]

However, after equilibrium is reached, one's final *considered moral judgments* need not be *intuitive judgments*.

When one revises one's set of considered moral judgments in light of a conflict with a principle or background theory, one's intuitions about the matter might change, but this is not required.

II. Reflective Equilibrium and Foundationalism/Coherentism

It is commonly assumed that if one endorses reflective equilibrium *as a theory of justification*, then one must be a coherentist about epistemic justification. This is a mistake.

foundationalism:

- i. There are *immediately justified beliefs* (= justified beliefs whose justification does not depend on the justification that one has for any other belief).
- ii. All other justified beliefs are justified *in virtue of their relation* to immediately justified beliefs.

Different versions of foundationalism give different accounts of (a) what sort of beliefs are *immediately justified*; (b) what it is that *makes* the immediately justified beliefs immediately justified; and (c) what sort of *connection* a mediatedly justified belief must have to immediately justified beliefs in order to be justified.

All (pure) *coherentists* deny that there are any immediately justified beliefs. Two varieties:

linear coherentism: All beliefs are justified by chains of justification that loop back on themselves.

holistic coherentism: The degree to which an individual belief is justified is determined by the coherence of some system of beliefs of which it is a part.

Different versions of holistic coherentism give different accounts of (a) what makes a system of beliefs *more or less coherent*; (b) what the *relevant system of beliefs* is for each individual belief; and (c) how the degree to which the relevant system of beliefs is *coherent* determines the degree to which the individual belief is *justified*.

A distinction that cuts across the foundationalism/coherentism distinction:

a "current time-slice" theory of justification: The justificational status of a belief is wholly a function of what is true of the subject *at the time of belief*.

an historical (or genetic) theory of justification: The justificational status of a belief can depend on the prior history of the subject holding that belief.

The lesson of DePaul's "Reflective Equilibrium and Foundationalism": the method of reflective equilibrium (whether wide or narrow) is compatible with versions of both foundationalism and coherentism about epistemic justification.

A distinction between two types of epistemic justification:

propositional justification: A proposition being justified for a subject (whether or not she believes it).

doxastic justification: A subject's state/episode of believing some proposition being justified.

Foundationalism and coherentism are most often formulated as *theories of doxastic justification*, but they can also be formulated as *theories of propositional justification*.

We can make a parallel distinction between versions of the *method of reflective equilibrium*:

propositional interpretation: The entities in the sets of considered judgments, of moral principles, and of background theories are *propositions*, with no requirement that the inquirer believe them.

doxastic interpretation: The entities in the sets of considered judgments, of moral principles, and of background theories are *propositions believed by the inquirer* (or equivalently: *beliefs by the inquirer in certain propositions*).

For all of these reasons, the connection between reflective equilibrium as a method of inquiry and reflective equilibrium as a theory of justification is quite complicated.

Nevertheless, any defender of reflective equilibrium as a theory of justification is, at a minimum, committed to the following claim:

(*) If one has reached a state of reflective equilibrium, then (one's belief in) any moral principle that makes up that equilibrium point is justified.

Moreover, many objections to reflective equilibrium as a theory of justification are analogues of standard objections to coherentism.

III. Daniels on the No-Initial-Credibility Objection

objection: Unless we have reason to think that our initial *considered moral judgments* [as well as the *judgments of comparative plausibility* that we appeal to when resolving conflicts] are *credible*, we have no reason to think that the method of reflective equilibrium leads us to justified beliefs.

[This is an analogue of the *no-contact-with-reality objection* to coherentism.]

Daniels' reply: First, this objection is often pressed by drawing a parallel between *considered moral judgments* and *observation reports*, but the analogy fails, since considered moral judgments are more like "theoretical" than "observation" statements: "we readily give reasons for moral judgments, and our appeal to theoretical considerations to support them is not mainly concerned with the conditions under which the judgments are made" (p. 270).

Second, the objection is at best premature. Once we are closer to attaining wide reflective equilibrium we will have a better idea of what moral facts and properties might be, and only then will we have a sufficiently clear understanding of the nature of morality for it to be possible to defend the credibility/reliability of our (initial) considered moral judgments.

another reply: The objection jumbles together two kinds of positive epistemic status: *credibility* and *justification*. When we pick one of these terms and stick to it, the objection becomes: if one's initial considered moral judgments are not justified, then one's final judgments when in a state of equilibrium will not be justified. But whether one is committed to this principle will depend on what theory of epistemic justification one holds. So Daniels is right: the objection "reduces either to a burden-of-proof argument . . . , or to a general foundationalist objection to coherence accounts of theory acceptance (or justification)" (p. 273). [However, given the current state of coherence theories of justification, this might still give us cause to worry.]

IV. Scanlon on the Charge of Relativism

objection: Two people with different initial moral judgments could arrive at equilibria consisting of different, incompatible moral principles. But if we accept reflective equilibrium *as a theory of justification*, we are then saddled with the implausible consequence that each person is justified in holding her principle.

[This is an analogue of the *alternative-systems objection* to coherentism.]

Scanlon's reply: “Faced with the case of someone who reaches an equilibrium different from my own, I must ask why this divergence occurred. If it occurred because the person began with different considered judgments, then I must ask whether I think, on further reflection, that the judgments that person accepted are correct and whether he or she was correct in rejecting the ones that I accepted. If the divergence occurred because the person made different choices at later stages in the process, when faced with the need to revise principles or modify considered judgments, then I need to consider whether these decisions were reasonable and, perhaps, whether I should revise my own decisions in the light of them. . . . The reexamination provoked by a case of this kind may disrupt the equilibrium I had reached, but it need not do so. Accepting the method of reflective equilibrium does not commit me to the view that the principles this other person has reached are justified unless I judge that not only that person's starting points but all of the steps he or she made along the way are sound” (pp. 152–153).

[Cf. Blackburn's expressivist reply to the charge of relativism in *Spreading the Word*, pp. 197–202.]

Is Scanlon denying that I have reached equilibrium before I consider the other person's chain of reasoning? Is he denying that the other person has reached equilibrium if she has not considered my reasoning? Also, can't we consider a case in which we both consider each other's cases and still reach different equilibria?

another reply: Accept that each person's belief in his or her principle is justified, but deny that this consequence is implausible.

[This has become the standard reply to the parallel objection to coherentism.]

V. DePaul on What Reflective Equilibrium Cannot Guarantee

claim 1: There is no guarantee that the method of reflective equilibrium will lead inquirers to *true beliefs*.

rationale: “. . . given enough screwy initial beliefs and unusual judgments about how to resolve conflicts, an inquirer could end up accepting just about anything in reflective equilibrium” (p. 297).

claim 2: There is no guarantee that the method of reflective equilibrium will even *reliably* lead inquirers to the truth.

rationale: Philosophers through the ages have employed reflective equilibrium and been led to a wide range of diverging views, and they can't all be right.

claim 3: There is no guarantee that the method of reflective equilibrium will lead inquirers to *justified beliefs*.

rationale: On one widely held conception, justification must be *truth conducive*. But then given claims 1 and 2, claim 3 follows.

Moreover, if one holds a *coherentist* view of justification, then “concerns about reflective equilibrium will simply reemerge as familiar objections to coherence theories of justification” (p. 299).

Finally, no matter what conception of justification one holds, it must be “objective” in the sense that “one's beliefs must satisfy certain objective standards [for example: don't commit the gambler's fallacy or make hasty generalizations] to count as justified But unfortunately the coherence constraints imposed by reflective equilibrium are not sufficient to guarantee that any inquirer employing the method will accept [or rather, follow] only correct epistemic standards” (p. 299).

VI. DePaul's Argument for the Rationality of Reflective Equilibrium

On DePaul's way of characterizing it, the *method of reflective equilibrium* instructs an inquirer to do two things as she attempts to construct a philosophical theory (p. 301):

1. Reflect upon the logical and evidential relations that hold between her initial intuitive judgments and the other beliefs and theories she accepts, between these judgments and the emerging theory she is constructing to account for them, between the emerging theory and any relevant background beliefs or theories she accepts, and so on.
2. Whenever these reflections uncover some sort of conflict or incoherence among beliefs, resolve the conflict by revising beliefs in the way that comes to seem most likely to be correct upon thorough reflection, that is, after taking into account everything she believes that might be relevant.

According to DePaul, any *alternative method of philosophical inquiry* must do one of the following:

- A. abandon reflection entirely,
- B. direct the inquirer to reflect, but to do so incompletely (that is, to leave certain beliefs, principles, theories, or what have you out of account), or
- C. not allow the results of the inquirer's reflections to determine what the inquirer goes on to believe.

DePaul's central claim: Any method of inquiry possessing feature (A), (B), or (C) is irrational.

- *Why incorporating (A) is irrational:* "To accept directive (A) one would have to give up entirely upon one's self and either accept whatever one happens to believe without giving it any thought or blindly submit to some sort of wholly external authority and accept what that authority dictates without giving it any thought" (p. 301).
- *Why incorporating (B) is irrational:* "In order to be following a genuine alternative to reflective the inquirer must not merely set aside or eliminate certain beliefs To be employing an alternative method the inquirer must eliminate beliefs *without any ground for doing so* When we focus our attention on the relevant kind of incomplete reflection, the kind that really is incompatible with reflective equilibrium, it becomes apparent that it is irrational after all" (p. 303).
- *Why incorporating (C) is irrational:* "Such a method would have to direct the inquirer to reflect, but after she had completed her reflections, to believe something other than what these reflections had led her to consider most likely to be correct. And [this] surely could not be rational . . . such an inquirer must be submitting to some sort of external or alien authority, since she goes with beliefs that she herself does not consider most likely to be correct" (p. 305).

Some things to think about when evaluating this argument:

- Do (A), (B), and (C) really exhaust the options?
- One can have grounds for eliminating a belief without realizing, via reflection, that one does.
- Does this argument secure the desired result only by opening up the method of reflective equilibrium to the charge of emptiness?

objection #1: Who cares about being "rational"?

reply #1: If you have to ask, you'll never know.

objection #2: Why should we, as philosophical inquirers, care more about the value of having rational beliefs than (say) the value of having true beliefs?

reply #2: Oops, out of time.